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AUTHOR Foote, Joe S.; Weber, David J.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the television network visibility of representatives and senators during the two-year period of the 97th Congress (1981-82). Among other questions, the study sought to determine whether high visibility on network news was limited to an elite group of leaders and activists, and whether the Senate-to-House network coverage ratio was as high as previous studies had found. The 1981 "Congressional Directory" was used to find names of senators and representatives from the 97th Congress. The "Television News Index & Abstracts" of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive was studied to collect data on congressional television exposure. Twenty-four monthly totals for each representative and senator were combined into yearly totals. The results indicated that coverage for the average member of Congress was quite low. Less than 2% of the House and Senate members accounted for nearly one-third of the total network news coverage of members of Congress. While the coverage figures were low for most members, they were particularly low for representatives. The Senate Majority Leader and the Speaker of the House accounted for more than 12% of the coverage given to members of both houses. The National Broadcasting Company gave the greatest amount of congressional coverage over the two-year period. (HTH)

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NETWORK EVENING NEWS VISIBILITY OF CONGRESSMEN AND SENATORS

by

Joe S. Foote
Visiting Assistant Professor
Department of Communication Arts
640 Stewart Avenue
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14850
607-256-6500

and

David J. Weber
Graduate Student
Department of Communication Arts
640 Stewart Avenue
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14850
607-256-6500

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Joe S. Foote

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Abstract

NETWORK EVENING NEWS VISIBILITY OF CONGRESSMEN AND SENATORS

This census of network television evening news coverage of members of the 97th Congress (1981-82) found more than one-third of the coverage going to an elite two percent of the Congress. Individual senators dominated congressmen by large margins. More than one hundred congressmen received no coverage. House committee chairmanships rarely provided a platform for national exposure but the House leadership dominated coverage in that body.

NETWORK EVENING NEWS VISIBILITY OF CONGRESSMEN AND SENATORS

Access to the network evening news by political leaders is highly competitive. While newspapers have room for a variety of national stories, the networks are limited to covering just a few of the day's top newsmakers. In our political system, only presidents have enjoyed access on a daily basis, leaving others to compete for prized exposure. The competition is particularly severe in the Congress where 535 individuals are potential subjects of network news stories.

This study examines the network visibility of Congressmen and Senators over a two-year period during the 97th Congress (1981-82). It is the first census of network coverage of individual members from both houses over an entire Congress. The study will consider the following research questions:

1. Is high visibility on network news limited to an elite group of leaders and activists?
2. Is the Senate-to-House network coverage ratio as high as previous studies found?
3. Has the decentralization of leadership in the Congress spread visibility to more Members?
4. Are committee chairmanships platforms for high visibility on the evening news?
5. Does the amount of congressional coverage vary greatly by network?

Previous research has shown that the Senate has traditionally received more news coverage than the House. Hess found that more media attention is directed toward the Senate than the House in both newspapers and television, although this was overwhelmingly true for television where the Senate received two-thirds of the coverage.[1] Robinson's content analysis of network news congressional coverage also found the Senate dominating the House two to one.[2] Kaid and Footte, however, found only a slight Senate advantage (54%-46%).[3] From interviews with Capitol Hill reporters, Blanchard inferred that the Senate receives more news coverage than the House.[4]

Most studies have focused on the House and Senate institutionally. In many ways, however, the Congress functions as a loose connection of 535 individuals whose exposure patterns vary widely. Weaver and Wilhoit looked at the

newspaper and wire service exposure of individual Senators over several Congresses. They found that Senators who are in positions of power are not necessarily those who receive the most frequent wire service coverage and that activity levels are usually the best predictors of senatorial visibility.[5] Payne, while examining the newspaper coverage patterns and committee attendance patterns of individual congressmen on the Public Works and Banking and Currency committees, found that few congressmen achieved high visibility. Regular national exposure was reserved for individuals who were able to attract attention either through their leadership positions, personalities, or focus on a particular legislative issue.[6]

Method

The 1981 Congressional Directory was used to find names of congressmen and senators for the 97th Congress. Through use of the Congressional Quarterly annual voting studies, fourteen congressmen and two senators occupying twelve seats were identified who served part but not all of the 97th Congress. These persons were dropped from the study; only the 523 Members of Congress who served a full term were included.[7] Demographic information on Members of Congress and their committee assignments was taken from Politics in America, 1982 and the Congressional Directory.

The Television News Index & Abstracts to the Vanderbilt Television News Archive was used to collect data on congressional exposure. The 1981 and 1982 yearly indexes provided information on months in which Members of Congress received coverage. The unit of analysis was the mention by name of a congressman or senator on the evening news. Each monthly index was examined to find newscasts in which senators and congressmen appeared. The date and topic of the story, as indexed by Vanderbilt, were recorded as was the network on which the legislators appeared. It was possible, therefore, for each Member of Congress to have three mentions for each story in a day if he/she appeared on all three networks. In order to be indexed by Vanderbilt archivists, a Congressman or Senator had to be shown either speaking or be mentioned by a correspondent or anchor. Members of Congress shown on the news but who did not speak or were not identified in the news script were not indexed.[8]

Twenty-four monthly totals for each congressman and senator were combined into yearly totals and a two-year 97th Congress total. Each visibility score contained in this paper is a total of the number of mentions for the entire

Congress. No attempt was made to judge the quality of the mentions. Because access to network news is so competitive, there seemed to be little risk of Members of Congress being mentioned when they had not done something that the networks considered newsworthy.

Findings

This network television study supports what Payne and Weaver and Wilhoit found with the print media, that coverage of the average Member of Congress is quite low. The mean number of mentions for all Members was 10.4 (32.6 for the Senate and 5.2 for the House), but this was skewed by the extraordinarily high visibility of a few members. Eighty-eight percent of House members and 72% of Senators fell below the mean. Less than two percent of the House and Senate members accounted for nearly one-third of the total network news coverage of Members of Congress.

While the coverage figures were low for most Members, they were particularly low for Congressmen. Table 1 shows that one-fourth of the House never saw any network exposure and more than three-fourths received under five mentions. This contrasts to the Senate where 90% were mentioned five or more times.

House/Senate Comparison. Clearly, the Senate dominates the House person for person, but these numbers are exaggerated because of the difference in the size of the two houses. When looking at the aggregate number of mentions for the House and Senate, the spread narrows to 60-40% in favor of the Senate. This is more Senate domination than found by Foote and Kaide (54-46%) but less than that found by Robinson and Hess (roughly two to one). Content analyses of newspaper coverage of Congress have shown the Senate leading the House 54-36% (Hess) and 57-37% (Miller).

Leadership Coverage. Perhaps more interesting than the percentage by which the Senate dominates coverage is what persons receive that coverage. In the 97th Congress, the Leadership clearly prevailed. Senate Majority Leader Baker and House Speaker O'Neill together accounted for more than twelve percent of the coverage given to members of both houses. Adding the two Minority Leaders, the House Majority Leader and the Senate Minority Whip, the Leadership held six of the top ten places. The overwhelming dominance of the leadership is somewhat surprising since most of the congressional literature during the past decade has

focused on the weakening of party leadership structure and the strengthening of maverick subcommittee chairmen pursuing their own agendas. Following this logic, one would assume that network coverage would also be more fragmented. As Table 2 shows, however, the coverage scheme is extremely top heavy with Leadership, especially in the House.

One explanation for the leadership emphasis could be the focal point created as a result of the Senate and House being controlled by different parties for the first time in 28 years. Speaker O'Neill stood as the lone counterpoint to President Reagan and a new Republican Leadership in the Senate became the point men for the President's program. The new Republican Senate team was not lacking for exposure; nine GOP committee chairmen and their floor Leader accounted for half of the top twenty most visible members. Conversely, only one House Chairman, Dan Rostenkowski of Ways & Means, made the cut.

Another group that faired well in this study was 1984 Democratic presidential candidates. Senators Cranston, Glenn, Hollings and Hart all registered in the list of the top twenty-five Members. Counting former candidates, nine of the top twenty-five, all Senators, had aspired to the presidency. This high media exposure supports the contention that proximity to the presidential orbit is a boon to congressional visibility.

Table 3 reflects wide intra-state visibility imbalances in the Senate. In seventy percent of the twenty states with the most senatorial exposure, one senator's visibility dominated his colleague 3-1. The contrast in intra-state senatorial visibility was so apparent (75% of all states showed a 2:1 ratio) that it seemed as if an institutionalized dominant-submissive role structure was being practiced in the Senate.

Committee Chairman Visibility. One of the most revealing parts of this study was the sharp contrast shown in Table 4 between the network visibility of Senate and House Committee Chairmen. Except for the Ways and Means and Budget Committees, which received high coverage during the 97th Congress, House committee chairmen were greatly overshadowed by their Senate counterparts. This imbalance, over time, could give the impression that the Senate is the legislative body most responsive to the public's concerns and the most aggressive in finding solutions for America's public policy problems. Such an impression could be highly misleading since the House is usually credited with having knowledgable committee chairmen, expert in both their subject areas, and in the legislative process.

In most House committees, the visibility of the Chairman was extraordinarily low. For example, chairmen of the Armed Services, Agriculture, Judiciary, Public Works, Merchant Marine & Fisheries, and Science & Technology committees averaged only 2.2 mentions on the evening news over a two year period. The ranking Republicans on these committees, also recognized as subject experts with sizable committee influence, averaged only one mention during the 97th Congress. Chairmen of committees with similar jurisdictions in the Senate, meanwhile, averaged 54 mentions and ranking Democrats 18. Clearly, with the exception of a few elite committees, House committee leadership is not the platform for network visibility it is in the Senate.

In some cases, the low visibility of House committee chairmen seemed to be purposive behavior. Chairman Whitten of the Appropriations Committee, for example, could command substantial publicity but frequently defers to his committee members, five of whom eclipsed him in visibility. Other chairmen, most of them senior members, also seem to see little need to court publicity, preferring to confine their activity to the Capitol complex where most are highly visible.

Inter-network differences. In addition to tabulating the exposure of Members of Congress, this study looked at the total amount of coverage given to Congress by the networks. Robinson found CBS and NBC leading in congressional coverage (CBS 36%; NBC 36%; ABC 28%) while Kaid and Foote found CBS clearly in the lead (CBS 41%; NBC 30%; and ABC 29%). This study showed NBC in the lead over a two-year period (NBC 39%; CBS 31%; and ABC 30%). These figures, of course, could fluctuate widely according to the network manpower assigned to the House and Senate. It does appear from this cumulative data, however, that ABC has consistently lagged behind the other two networks in its congressional coverage.

Discussion

Network correspondents who report on Congress seem to follow well-worn paths which lead to House and Senate leaders, Senate Committee Chairmen, and senators in general. With less than one-fourth the members of the House, the Senate still commands more coverage. Now that control of the houses is in different hands, institutional coverage imbalances could have partisan overtones as both parties try to influence the public issue agenda.

This study shows that visibility for senators is relatively easy but it can be very difficult for a representative to become a national spokesman. While Senate and House committee chairmen may sit across the table from each other as equals in conference committees, there is little equality in their ability to reach a national forum via network television news. In the Senate, even the ranking minority member and several backbench senators on the committee have more visibility than the complementary House committee chairman. This phenomenon is interesting because both houses consider the same issues during the same Congress. Each body has well-informed spokesmen and each committee usually generates sufficient controversy to whet the appetites of network producers. Yet the attention usually goes to the Senate. It would seem that visibility feeds on itself with correspondents and producers gravitating toward persons who are already well-known and who are likely to be identified by a nationwide audience. To break this cycle of House obscurity would require a conscious effort by the networks to resurrect the House as a prominent news source.

Within the House, the Leadership has a corner on visibility. Considering that the House has become much more democratic in recent years, that power has been dispersed to independent-minded subcommittee chairmen, and that the power of leadership has declined significantly in the last twenty-five years, it is surprising that the de facto power of network news visibility rests squarely with the Speaker. Speaker O'Neill in many respects seems an unlikely candidate for this mega-exposure because he has built his career while largely ignoring the invitations of network journalists. On the other hand, the Speaker's Irish background and liberal credentials make him a perfect counterpoint to President Reagan, furnishing the networks with a visually and editorially compelling symbol who can be played against Reagan in simple story lines that substitute for complex ideas.

The House quest for exposure seems like a huge audition for a Broadway play. The networks choose a theme and collect the requisite number of actors to make a company. This thematic behavior results in wide shifts in House visibility. For example, the Judiciary Committee, the darling of the networks in the mid-seventies during the Nixon presidency, is today one of the least visible committees on network news. During the 97th Congress the President's budget was the central theme which meant much heavier than usual network attention for members of the Budget and Ways and Means Committees. All congressmen within the orbit of the budget story suddenly had a chance for increased national exposure. Congressmen,

long regarded as economics experts in the House but unknown nationwide, suddenly were in temporary demand by network correspondents.

A larger question is whether the imbalances and omissions detailed in this study are simply the result of the legitimate dynamics of news flows or the result of man-made organizational constraints in the news processing system. If the former is true, we must question from our viewing of evening news whether the House of Representatives is worthy of co-equal status with an institution like the Senate which, because of its visibility, seems to be far more productive and effective. If the latter is true, and the House is undercovered partly because of organizational bias within the networks, than the networks may be laying a trap of obscurity for a viable institution whose need for public visibility in a representative democracy is no less than its co-equal counterpart.

Footnotes

[1]Hess, Stephen. The Washington Reporters. Washington, D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1981, p. 101.

[2]Robinson, Michael J. and Kevin R. Appel. "Network News Coverage of Congress." Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 94 (Fall 1979), pp. 410-11.

[3]Kaid, Lynda L.; J. S. Foote; G. Givens; and J. Hunter. "Television Network News and the Political System: Comparing the Coverage of the President and Congress." Paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention. Minneapolis, 1981.

[4]Blanchard, Robert O. Congress and the News Media. New York: Hastings House, 1974.

[5]Weaver, David H. and G. Cleveland Wilhoit. "News Media Coverage of U. S. Senators in Four Congresses, 1953-1974." Journalism Monographs, Number 67 (April 1980).

[6]Payne, James L. "Show Horses & Work Horses in the United States House of Representatives." Polity, Vol. 12, Issue No. 3 (Spring 1980): 428-456.

[7]Congressmen and senators will often be referred to collectively in this study as Members of Congress or Members.

[8]Telephone interview with Paul Simpson, Vanderbilt Television Archive, November, 1983.

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Table 1: Senate-House Network Television Evening News Visibility Comparison

Total Number of Mentions	Senate (N=99) Members	Percent	House (N=424) Members	Percent
50+	17	17	6	1
10-49	53	54	42	10
5-9	20	20	55	13
1-4	9	9	212	50
0	0	0	109	26
Totals	99	100	424	100

Table 2: Most Visible Senators and Representatives on Network Television Evening News During the 97th Congress

Senators	1981/82 Mentions	Representatives
H. Baker (R)	360	
	325	T. O'Neill (D)
E. Kennedy (D)	197	
R. Dole (R)	161	
	133	R. Michael (R)
R. Byrd (D)	113	
J. Helms (R)	107	
C. Percy (R)	106	
A. Cranston (D)	104	
	95	J. Wright (D)
P. Domenici (D)	74	
J. Glenn (D)	74	
	74	D. Rostenkowski(D)
O. Hatch (R)	73	
B. Goldwater (R)	66	
H. Jackson (D)	66	
P. Laxalt (R)	59	
R. Packwood (R)	57	
D. Moynihan (D)	57	
J. Tower (R)	56	
	54	P. Gramm (D)
	54	J. Jones (D)
E. Hollings (D)	50	
G. Hart (D)	49	
	49	J. Kemp (R)
M. Hatfield (R)	48	
P. Tsongas (D)	48	
H. Metzenbaum (D)	46	
	43	C. Pepper (D)
S. Thurmond (R)	41	
S. Hayakawa (R)	38	
C. Pell (D)	38	
L. Pressler (R)	38	
J. East (R)	37	
L. Weicker (R)	35	
J. Danforth (R)	34	
S. Nunn (D)	32	
W. Proxmire (D)	32	

Senators	1981/82 Mentions	Representatives
J. Biden (D)	31	
P. Leahy (D)	31	
	29	B. Conable (R)
W. Armstrong (R)	28	
D. Riegle (D)	28	
R. Long (D)	27	
C. Dodd (D)	26	
D. Quale (R)	26	
R. Lugar (R)	25	
	25	H. Reuss (D)
H. Cannon (D)	24	
T. Stevens (R)	24	
	23	J. Addabo (D)
	23	D. Latta (R)
P. Sarbanes (D)	23	
	22	S. Conte (R)
J. Denton (R)	22	
	22	M. Fenwick (D)
W. Bradley (D)	21	
W. Roth (R)	21	
C. Grassley (R)	20	
J. Johnston (D)	20	
	20	L. Panetta (D)
	20	M. Udall (D)
N. Kassenbaum (R)	19	
A. Simpson (R)	19	
	19	C. Stenholm (D)
J. Stennis (D)	19	
J. Warner (R)	19	
M. Andrews (R)	18	
R. Boschwitz (R)	18	
E. Garn (R)	18	
H. Heflin (D)	18	
J. Heinz (R)	18	
P. McCloskey (R)	18	
	18	A. Moffett (D)
	18	D. Obey (D)
M. Wallop (R)	18	

N = 76. Senators = 57. Representatives = 19. Democrats = 39. Republicans = 37.

Table 3: Comparisons of Network Television Exposure for Senior and Junior Senators Ranked by Senators' Combined Mentions During the 97th Congress

State	Senators	Party	Total Mentions 97th Congress
*Tennessee (372)	Baker, H.	R	360
	Sasser, J.	D	12
*Massachusetts (245)	Kennedy E.	D	197
	Tsongas, P.	D	48
*Kansas (180)	Dole, R.	R	161
	Kassenbaum, N.	R	19
*North Carolina (144)	Helms, J.	R	107
	East, J.	R	37
*California (142)	Cranston, A.	D	104
	Hayakawa, S.	R	38
**West Virginia (122)	Randolph, J.	D	9
	Byrd, R.	D	113
Ohio (120)	Glenn, J.	D	74
	Metzenbaum, H.	D	46
*Illinois (110)	Percy, C.	R	106
	Dixon, A.	D	4
Oregon (105)	Hatfield, M.	R	48
	Packwood, B.	R	57
South Carolina (91)	Thurmond, S.	R	41
	Hollings, E.	D	50
**Utah (91)	Garn, J.	R	18
	Hatch, O.	R	73
*New Mexico (90)	Domenici, P.	R	74
	Schmitt, H.	R	16
#*New Jersey (87)	Williams, H.	D	66
	Bradley, B.	D	21
**Nevada (83)	Cannon, H.	D	24
	Laxalt, P.	R	59
*Arizona (79)	Goldwater, B.	R	66
	DeConcini, D.	D	13
Colorado (77)	Hart, G.	D	49
	Armstrong, W.	R	28
*Washington (74)	Jackson, H.	D	66
	Gorton, S.	R	8
*New York (63)	Moynihan, D.	D	57
	D'Amato, A.	R	6

Table 3: Comparisons of Network Television Exposure for Senior and Junior Senators Ranked by Senators' Combined Mentions During the 97th Congress (cont'd.)

State	Senators	Party	Total Mentions 97th Congress
Connecticut (61)	Weicker, L.	R	35
	Dodd, C.	D	26
*Texas (61)	Tower, J.	R	56
	Bentsen, L.	D	5
*Rhode Island (55)	Pell, C.	D	38
	Chafee, J.	R	17
Delaware (52)	Roth, W.	R	21
	Biden, J.	D	31
Indiana (51)	Lugar, R.	R	25
	Quayle, D.	R	26
Louisiana (47)	Long, R.	D	27
	Johnston, J. B.	D	20
*Michigan (41)	Riegle, D.	D	28
	Levin, C.	D	13
*Wisconsin (41)	Proxmire, W.	D	32
	Kasten, R.	R	9
Alabama (40)	Heflin, H.	D	18
	Denton, J.	R	22
Maryland (40)	Mathias, C.	R	17
	Sarbanes, P.	D	23
*South Dakota (40)	Pressler, L.	R	38
	Abdnor, J.	R	2
**Missouri (40)	Eagleton, T.	D	6
	Danforth, J.	R	34
*Georgia (38)	Nunn, S.	D	32
	Mattingly, M.	R	6
**Vermont (38)	Stafford, J.	R	7
	Leahy, P.	D	31
Wyoming (37)	Wallop, M.	R	18
	Simpson, A.	R	19
Iowa (33)	Jepsen, R.	R	13
	Grassley, C.	R	20
Minnesota (30)	Durenberger, D.	R	12
	Boschwitz, R.	R	18
Arkansas (27)	Bumpers, D.	D	17
	Pryor, D.	D	10

Table 3: Comparisons of Network Television Exposure for Senior and Junior Senators Ranked by Senators' Combined Mentions During the 97th Congress (cont'd.)

State	Senators	Party	Total Mentions 97th Congress
*Alaska (26)	Stevens, T.	R	24
	Murkowski, F.	R	2
*Pennsylvania (26)	Heinz, J.	R	18
	Specter, A.	R	8
**Virginia (25)	Byrd, H.	I	6
	Warner, J.	R	19
Nebraska (24)	Zorinsky, E.	D	11
	Exon, J.	D	13
*Mississippi (22)	Stennis, J.	D	19
	Cochran, T.	R	3
Florida (19)	Chiles, L.	D	9
	Hawkins, P.	R	10
**North Dakota (19)	Burdick, Q.	D	1
	Andrews, M.	R	18
Idaho (17)	McClure, J.	R	8
	Symms, S.	R	9
Montana (13)	Melcher, J.	D	7
	Baucus, M.	D	6
*Hawaii (11)	Inouye, D.	D	10
	Matsunaga, S.	D	1
New Hampshire (11)	Humphrey, G.	R	6
	Rudman, W.	R	5
*Oklahoma (11)	Boren, D.	D	8
	Nickles, D.	R	3
Maine (10)	Cohen, W.	R	6
	Mitchell, G.	D	4
Kentucky (10)	Huddleston, W.	D	6
	Ford, W.	D	4

* Senior senator was mentioned at least twice as often as junior senator.

** Junior senator was mentioned at least twice as often as senior senator.

\# Senator Williams did not serve the full two years of the 97th Congress.

Table 4: Selected Senate/House Committee Chairman Visibility Rankings

Senate Committee/ House Committee	Senate Chairman	Number of Mentions	House Chairman	Number of Mentions
Finance/Ways and Means	Dole, R.	161	Rostenkowski, D.	74
Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry/ Agriculture	Helms, J.	107	de la Garza, K.	3
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